The Royal Hunter and His Court

BLACK SEA
CAUCASUS MTS.
GEORGIA
Mtskheta
Tiflis
CASPIAN SEA
ARAL SEA
JAXARTES R.
TRANSOXIANA
KHORESM
Afrasiyab
Varakhshah
Samarkand
Bukhara
Piandjikent
SOGD
OXUS R.
ANATOLIA
ARMENIA
L. VAN
L. URMIA
Ganzak
AZERBAIJAN
Nisibis
TIGRIS R.
Nineveh
Hatra
DAILAMAN
GILAN
MAZANDERAN
Shahr-i Qumis
Merv
Antioch
SYRIA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Palmyra
Dura-Europos
MESOPOTAMIA
Paikuli
Qasvin
Tehran
Sari
Chal Tarkhan-Eshqabad
KHORASAN
Balkh
BACTRIA
Fondukistan
HINDU KUSH MTS.
Begram
Kabul
AFGHANISTAN
Taq-i Bostan
IRAN
Alexandria
Jerusalem
EUPHRATES R.
Baghdad
Ctesiphon (Choche)
Kish
Nippur
Susa
Isfahan
Qadisiya
HIRA
KHUZISTAN
SAKASTAN
Istakhr
Naqsh-i Rustam
Bishapur
Persepolis
FARS
KIRMAN
NILE R.
INDUS R.
INDIA
Antinoë
RED SEA
EGYPT
ARABIA

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The Sasanians, who ruled the Persian Empire for more than four centuries (AD 224-651), presided over one of the richest courts of their day. Strategically located on the main trade route between China and Rome (the producer and largest consumer of silk), Persia accumulated the vast amounts of wealth necessary to support the extravagances of the Sasanian court. Very little is now known, however, about this dynasty which, at its greatest power, dominated the East from the Euphrates to the Hindu Kush (Figure 1). The most impressive monuments remaining from the Sasanian Empire are the huge rock reliefs carved in the mountain cliffs of present-day Iran memorializing the triumphs of warrior and hunter and reflecting the majesty and grandeur of that period (Figure 2). Beautiful and carefully worked silver vessels, textiles, pottery, seals, and ornaments reveal the splendor of the powerful kings and their courtly society; they convey at least a partial picture of the life and culture of the once-great empire.

Figure 1. Map of the Sasanian Empire.

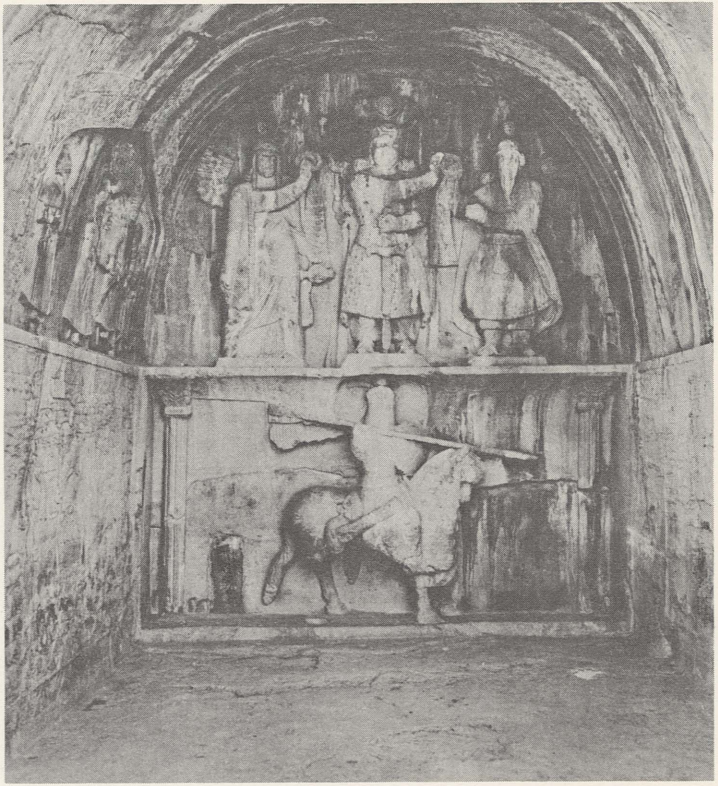

Figure 2. Rock reliefs at Taq-i-Bustan.

The King and His Court

The court set the standard and molded the tastes of the sophisticated luxury-loving Persian nobility. The Persian nobleman, with elegantly groomed mustache and flowing hair, was dressed in long trousers and a short tunic, usually of brightly colored and patterned silk or wool. His fine clothes were decorated with embroidered or embossed metal roundels depicting birds and fabulous symbolic animals (Figure 3). A heavy mantle (clasped about his shoulders) and a jeweled sword (a symbol of rank and authority) complete the image of the Sasanian nobleman.

No one at the court, however, could rival the splendor of the king himself, who was dressed in royal red from tunic to boots. His hair and beard were elaborately curled and held by ornaments, and he also wore necklaces and earrings of pearls and other precious stones. The royal sword, which was part of the ceremonial costume as well as a hunting or fighting weapon, was more ornate than any worn by his nobles and represented the king's supreme, universal power. As the head of both government and religion (Zoroastrianism), the king commanded the respect and almost superstitious reverence of his subjects.

Figure 3. The mythological *senmurw.*

Figure 4.
Horn-shaped
drinking vessel
(rhyton)
terminating in
an animal head.

The Persian pursuit of luxury and pleasure was manifested at large banquets. Gold and silver tableware—bowls, plates adorned with decorative figures, and ornamented ladles and serving utensils—have been found, testifying to the great expense and care given to courtly dining. Especially interesting are the horn-shaped silver drinking vessels (*rhyta*) which were often decorated with scenes from court life or the hunt and sometimes formed into the shape of an animal (Figure 4). When full, the vessels would not stay upright on the table, thus obliging the drinker to down the contents in one long draft. The scenes depicted on these vessels and other silver ware were often symbolic, and certain scenes were restricted to certain types of silver. Royal scenes, for example, usually showing the king hunting (Figure 5), were reserved exclusively for decorative plates. Dancing females (perhaps symbolizing the king's goddess), on the other hand, are almost always found on water pitchers and vases (Figure 6).

Figure 5. The king hunting lions.

Figure 6. Silver ewer with dancing females.

Figure 7. Man playing a mandolin, detail from a silver bowl.

Eating and drinking were not the only amusements at Sasanian banquets. Dancing entertained the diners to the accompaniment of hornpipes, lutes, drums, tambourines, and mandolins (Figure 7). Wrestling matches were also a favorite source of enjoyment. For those more intellectually inclined, there were formalized and complex riddle competitions and games of skill such as backgammon and chess.

Every spring the king celebrated the renewal of his reign. This was one of the biggest festivals of the year and was accompanied by feasting, drinking, and the bestowal of royal gifts. The throne room would be covered with mosaics (Figure 8) and brightly colored silk carpets and wall hangings woven with silver and gold. One such wall hanging, *The Spring of Khusrau,* especially pleased the king because of its brilliant representation of a garden with walks and streams, neatly manicured lawns, and flower gardens made up of precious stones. Thus, even in the gloom of winter the royal court could be brightened with the illusion of a spring garden.

Figure 8. Mosaic with head of a satyr.

Another activity which figured largely in the life of the nobility, and which is depicted on many Sasanian objects, is hunting. Like most aspects of Persian life, hunting was done in a sophisticated, semi-artificial way. Vast game parks were enclosed and always kept well stocked. For the "convenience" of the hunters, open stretches would be temporarily enclosed and hundreds of men would drive boar, stag, or wild birds in huge numbers across the path of the royal party, thereby ensuring a successful hunt (Figure 9). The hunting scenes on Sasanian objects often represent allegorical struggles; for example, the king is the only figure shown hunting the lion, the king of beasts.

In the throne room of his palace on audience days, the king was seated upon a suitably imposing throne of ornamented gold that rested upon gilded lion's legs. One of the kings is reported to have established three additional golden thrones for the visiting guests he considered deserving of the honor: one for the emperor of China, one for the king of the Khazars in southeastern Russia, and one for the emperor of Byzantium. Indeed, Sasanian embassies extended from Byzantium to China, and the king's armies

Figure 9. Stucco plaque showing the king hunting wild boar.

travelled as far eastward as the Mediterranean seacoast and westward into Central Asia. Gifts of silver were sent not only to members of the royal court but also to rulers and allies abroad, particularly those of neighboring lands, to express friendship as well as to indicate the strength and power of the Sasanian dynasty. The influence of the Sasanian king and his court was far-reaching and enduring. Long after the downfall of the dynasty, symbols and designs associated with the Sasanians continued to be used in cultures of both the Mohammedan Near East and Christian Europe.

Sasanian Silver Techniques

The most famous works of art remaining from the Sasanian period are silver vessels. Although their skills in the production of glass, stucco, bronze, ceramics, and textiles are significant, the Sasanians were outstanding silversmiths.

Sasanian court silver is unusually pure and consistently uniform, indicating that the metal may have been mined from one particular location. After the ore was mined it was refined and combined with copper to give it hardness. The simplest technique for making silver bowls and vessels from the silver alloy is to pour the molten metal into a mold and allow it to harden. The Sasanian silver vessels, however, appear to have been worked in a variety of more complex techniques.

Usually the molten silver was allowed to harden and then flattened into a sheet slightly larger than the object to be made. The sheet of silver was rounded into a hollow disk by hammering. The hammering process was then continued on the outside of the vessel, while the silver was supported from the inside by a wooden stake. To keep the silver from cracking while it was being hammered, the object was intermittently heated and then dipped into cold water—a process called annealing (softening the metal). After hammering the object to the desired shape, the surface of the piece was smoothed by striking it all over with a different flat-headed hammer. The shaping of silver into objects by hammering is called raising; it was this technique that was used by Sasanian artisans to shape most of their bowls, plates, and jugs.

Handles and decorative attachments were usually cast in silver from wax or clay molds and then joined to the object by riveting or by soldering. Because the solder had to melt at a temperature lower than that of silver, to prevent melting the main piece, these connecting joints were less durable than the silver itself.

Completed silver pieces were then decorated, often by using other methods of hammering; a preferred method was *repoussé.* In *repoussé* the silver vessel was placed into a bed of tar and the inside of the vessel was hammered gently. The tar gave way only where the metal was pushed by the hammer so that the vessel still retained its overall shape. Final details were added to the

outer surfaces by engraving, chasing, or punching the silver. Chasing meant striking the surface with a series of hammer blows to indent the object in a continuous line or pattern. Silver vessels were also decorated by gilding with a thin layer of gold, or a combination of mercury and gold (the mercury evaporated when the object was heated and the gold was thus bonded to the silver surface). Finally, the silver was polished with abrasives to heighten the finish.

The technique used by the Sasanians for decorating hunting plates was highly unusual. They did not hammer out the designs from the back as one might expect. Instead, they cast the plate very thick and then carved away the background, leaving the figures in low relief. When higher relief was required, the silversmith added prefabricated pieces. These intricately assembled and decorated hunting plates are the most beautiful of all Sasanian silver work.

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